THE LIFE WORK AND DEATH OF PLACIDO

BY

BEN FREDERIC CARRUTHERS

B.S., University of Wisconsin, 1932

M.A., University of Illinois, 1933

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN
SPANISH IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF
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THE LIFE, WORK AND DEATH OF PLACIDO

This dissertation is the first attempt to evaluate in English the poetry of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, *Plácido.* Furthermore, it is an attempt to clarify much that has remained obscure in the extraordinary life and death of this romantic poet, and to recapture some of the atmosphere of turbulence and revolution so typical of the epoch in which he lived and died.

Even the American intellectuals and dilettantes know little of the literary contributions of Afro-Americans to the literature of the United States. Phyllis Wheatley, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay and Sterling Brown are but a few of the Afro-American poets whose verse has never received the attention from America it so richly deserves. If these American poets are comparatively unknown in their native land except to connoisseurs, it is understandable that such Afro-Cuban poets as Plácido, Manzano, and contemporary versifiers such as Nicolás Guillén and Regino Pedroso are virtually unknown to United States citizens of all races but loved and admired throughout Spanish America and in Spain as well. Any attempt to study the contributions of non-Caucasians to the poetry of Cuba must begin with Plácido.

Few nations have suffered the century-long agonies of birth that were the lot of Cuba; few races have been as downtrodden or as hopelessly enslaved as the Negro; few children are as despised as are the illegitimate; few men are as frustrated as the mulatto. The divine spark of genius, however, knows no race, no climate, no nationality, no legitimacy, and in defiance of all the circumstances of birth which seemed to preclude the emergence of his genius, the Cuban poet Plácido, illegitimate, mulatto and impoverished, is one of the glories of Cuban literature and may well stand as a symbol of na-

ture's own defiance of the system into which he was born.

Like Cervantes, Byron and Espronceda, Plácido had a life as interesting as his literary compositions, replete with a certain romantic pathos, for Hostos is possibly right in his assertion that "the saddest ages are the most poetic, the most tyrannized peoples the most lyric."

The poet, born in 1809 the illegitimate son of a mulatto barber and a white Spanish dancer from Burgos, was rescued from the Havana orphanage by his father and raised by his paternal grandmother in Havana. At seventeen the boy, apprenticed to Nicolás Bota, a master tortoise-shell craftsman, deserted Havana for Matanzas with which city his name is forever linked.

During Plácido's entire lifetime the unhappy colony was a victim of the Spanish policy which Acosta names one of *oprimir para exprimir.* Plácido's childhood was spent in an atmosphere charged with suspicion of revolt and beclouded with the issue of slavery. Spanish officialdom was loath to suppress the slave trade since it was a source of great illegal wealth. By 1811 free Negroes and slaves outnumbered the white Spaniards and *criollos* by about nine percent, and the successful exploits of Toussaint L'Ouverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines against French power in Haiti added to the restlessness of the white, black and mulatto populations of nearby Cuba. Thus all ingredients for revolution and conspiracy were present in Cuba as early as 1811 although the first outbreaks of revolt against Spain did not occur until 1818.

Hostos was the first to point out that in many respects Plácido, like the period in which he lived, was physiologically a transition. Coming partly from the African race he moved towards the Caucasian. He went from the black to the white as did the trend of the ethnology of Cuba; from a distant past of slavery towards freedom in the external as well as the internal political life of the colony.

By 1829 the full realization of his status in society had come to Plácido. He realized that in spite of his legal freedom

he was a member of a despised race. Even among free Negroes and mulattoes, and there were thousands of them at the time in Cuba, the young man was looked down upon because of his illegitimacy. The youth, frightened by the problems of a normal adolescence in addition to those peculiar to him, indulged in long hours of introspection in the luxuriant natural surroundings of Matanzas where he found consolation in nature and in the rhythm of life. In the purely romantic tradition the Muse began to whisper and fill his soul to such a degree that he felt impelled to write down the inspirations as they came to him.

About 1831 the really great love affair of Plácido's life began. The object of this passion was a lovely colored girl, Rafaela, employed in bondage by an aristocratic Matanzas family which spent much time in Havana. Fela was of such striking beauty that she was known to her mistress' friends as *la Venus etiópica.* They hoped to marry, thus freeing Fela from slavery, but she died of cholera in the Havana epidemic of 1833. In the really romantic tradition Plácido thus suffered the blow which was to make him a great poet. As Lamartine grieved for the dead Elvire, Musset for the inconstant George Sand, so Plácido wept for his lost Fela.

It was decided in literary circles in Havana to hold a contest in poetry to honor Martínez de la Rosa the great Spanish romanticist who had become Prime Minister of Spain in 1834. Like Zorrilla at the funeral of Larra three years later or Calderón de la Barca in the contest sponsored by Lope de Vega in Madrid in 1622, Plácido surged into public notice with his inspired reading of *La Siempreviva,* his own contribution to the tributes. The poem won first prize. As a result of the fame of *La Siempreviva* Plácido became the favorite of Havana literary dilettantes.

Plácido was in great demand as a writer of festive verses, and the real poet became to a certain extent the victim of his own literary fame through no fault of his own, but because of the unfavorable conditions surrounding his ambiguous

status in society. The popularity of Plácido is not very difficult to explain since it had become the fashion during the latter part of the eighteenth century to take great interest in the exotic. Romanticism had idealized the Indians of the New World and the nineteenth century was ready to see great merit in the African slaves that swarmed in the West Indian plantations.

Plácido, *Isabelino* in sentiments, heaped praise upon the Queen of Spain, her Queen-Regent mother and wrote bitter and vindictive verse against the pretender Don Carlos who represented the parties of conservatism in Spain. His poetry in praise of the Queen's party must, in the light of other revolutionary poetry by Plácido, be interpreted as evidence of the poet's liberalism as opposed to the *españolismo* of the Carlists. Later in his career and notably in the poems *El Juramento, Al General D. A. La Flor* and *¡Habaneros Libertad!* we find ample evidence of the poet's desire for *Cuba Libre.*

During the years 1840 to 1843 the poet travelled a great deal to Santa Clara, Cienfuegos, Sagua la Grande and Havana. He continued his trade of comb-maker and wrote commercial poetry for the provincial newspapers. During this period the poet first aroused the suspicions of the Spanish authorities and there is evidence that he was arrested on suspicion in Santa Clara as early as 1840.

In 1842 the poet married for convenience. His wife, María Gil Ramona Morales, was a free woman of color who lived in Matanzas and whose only desire in life apparently was to make her husband happy.

In 1843 Plácido was again arrested in Santa Clara and this time taken to Havana for questioning. The new Captain-General, Leopoldo O'Donnell, a ruthless militarist, regarded all writers with suspicion and all colored men of intelligence doubly so. Released once more for lack of concrete evidence against him, Plácido went to Trinidad on the south coast of Cuba for Holy Week and to find employment. Here he was arrested again and held for some months. Upon his release

he returned to Matanzas by steamer to find himself regarded with great suspicion there. His final arrest for implication in the *Conspiración de la Escalera* took place in Matanzas February 29th, 1844.

It has never been proved that the conspiracy of the *Escalera* really existed. This lack of proof, however, did not deter the Spanish authorities from taking extraordinary measures against the "leaders" including Plácido. This opened up one of the most ruthless and bloody periods in New World history. The lack of proof did not mitigate the fears of white Cubans and those responsible for the persecutions of the colored population made use of a campaign of fear—a veritable war of nerves—which silenced those liberal whites who generally opposed Spanish highhandedness. The name *Conspiración de la Escalera* had its origin in the wide-spread use of a device in vogue for obtaining confessions at that time in Cuba. Suspects were chained face down upon a stairway and flogged until they "confessed." Although this device had been used before, it had never been employed on such a wide scale. The authorities maintained that the Cuban Negroes and their mulatto allies planned to establish an independent nation in emulation of the Haitians across the Windward Passage.

Plácido was included in the wholesale arrests which followed two unsuccessful slave insurrections near Matanzas and "accused" by thirty-two "co-conspirators" of being the leader of the movement aimed at the whites in Cuba. On June 12, 1844 Plácido and ten fellow free *matanceros* were sentenced to execution for treason. We are told that during the entire nightmare of the *Escalera* six hundred persons suffered imprisonment, four hundred were exiled, three hundred were declared "missing" and ninety-eight were executed by firing squads for high treason.

During the last days of his existence the poet composed four poems which must be accepted as representative of the greatest manifestations of his genius. These include *La Fatalidad, Despedida a Mi Madre, Adios a Mi Lira* and *Plegaria a Dios*

The *Plegaria* was recited above the rolling drums by the poet on his way to execution and in the presence of twenty thousand spectators from all parts of the island. Sentence was carried out June 28th, 1844.

Plácido and Milanés, contemporaries and fellow residents of Matanzas are the first great romantic poets of Cuba. Many critics reject romanticism as unsuited to the temperament of the Spanish writer and one has but to refer to the nineteenth century Spanish novel to see how realism triumphed over romanticism and naturalism which were for the most part Gallic importations with which many Spanish writers in all *genres* amused themselves. The Cuban poets listened to the Spanish romanticists but were fully aware that the fount from which they drank was the great French school of Chateaubriand, Vigny, Lamartine, Musset and, above all, Victor Hugo.

Salazar y Roig classifies the Cuban poets into five groups: Classic—Zequeira and Rubalcava; Pre-Romantic—Heredia and Del Monte; Romantic—Plácido, Milanés, Avellaneda; Parnassians—Mendive, Luaces, Zenea; Modernists—Casal, Martí.

Enrique Piñeyro was the first critic to refer to the seven prominent poets of pre-modernist nineteenth century Cuba as the Cuban pleyade. This galaxy of poets includes Heredia, Plácido, Milanés, Avellaneda, Luaces, Mendive and Zenea.

The three poets of the Cuban pleyade with whom Plácido should be compared and contrasted in view of their almost simultaneous developments and similar tendencies are Heredia, Avellaneda and Milanés. Chronologically, Plácido comes between Heredia and Avellaneda. The Spanish poets who were not only contemporaries but also served as models for Plácido are Gallego, Quintana, Espronceda and Zorrilla.

Although the love poetry of Plácido is by no means his best, it is sincere at least in those poems in which the poets sings of Fela and in those tender elegies written after her death. In the lighter love verse of Plácido we find the familiar tendency of romantic poets to allow the imagination free rein and mention of many loves which must have been figments

of the poet's imagination since serious study of the life of Plácido leads one to the conclusion that, although he was very passionate and probably fancied himself a Don Juan, Fela was the only woman in his life to inspire more than passing desire and affection. Very few of Plácido's erotic poems are wholly good but even in the least good there are lines of which Espronceda, Zorrilla or Avellaneda might well have been proud. It is in such soft erotic verse as *La Ausencia* that one sees a definite contrast with the virility and strength of the amatory poetry of Avellaneda. In this poem which combines the erotic with delicately tinted description reminiscent of a Corot landscape, Plácido's verse is almost effeminate like that of Milanés. Probably the best of the poet's love poems are the two sonnets, *A Una Ingrata* and *A Mi Amada,* and the letrilla *La Flor de la Caña.*

The elegies written upon the death of Fela are, with the possible exception of the four prison poems, the most sincere verses from Plácido's pen. These elegies differ from those written for friends and patrons upon the death of a loved one in the absence of the rhetorical and of artificial elements so characteristic of the latter. In the first mood of these elegies inspired by the death of Fela the *culte du moi* is at its height; the romantic poet thinks only of himself and the impossibility of continuing an existence without the love of the beloved. The phrases are not studied but dashed off in a mood of intense sorrow. The second mood is one in which the poet calls upon his friends to comfort him in his sorrow. These compositions are more worthy of the poet's genius. Here the first indications of the fatalism which was to grow stronger with the years and the increasingly evil fortune of the poet are evident. The third mood of the elegies to Fela is one in which the passing of time has dimmed many memories and Fela has become confused in the mind of the poet with the Muse of poetry. *La Malva Azul* is an elegy written by Plácido on the death of José María de Heredia. Its soft tender lines are as the strings of an orchestra with little intervention on the part of

the woodwinds and none on the part of the brasses. In comparing the tributes on this occasion one must consider that of Avellaneda and when one does so he comes to the inescapable conclusion that in the elegy at least, Plácido more than held his own with the eloquent and majestic Muse of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda.

Plácido, like his Spanish contemporaries, notably Zorrilla and Espronceda, wrote *leyendas* in the Moorish-Spanish manner. Doubtless inspired by the publication of Zorrilla's *Cantos del Trovador* (1840-'41), Plácido abandoned sonorous odes, didactic *fábulas* and philosophical meditations for the preparation of *El Hijo de Maldición* which was finished by 1843 and published as a *folleto* in Matanzas. According to the poet's own definition, it is a *leyenda caballeresca del tiempo de las Cruzadas*. The poem is divided into twenty-one cantos in each of which is used the verse form which most nearly corresponds to the mood of the part. This poem whose source has never been detected by *placidistas*, may have been a medieval legend or its source may have been purely classic in the central theme which is essentially that of the Greek tragedy woven around the incestuous Phedra and Hippolitus. Such a *leyenda* written in Spain by one of the great romantic poets would have elicited great praise and would doubtless have become as well known as the similar work of Zorrilla and Espronceda. The perfection of its form, the exquisite beauty of its descriptive passages, the strength and virility of the manner of narration make it one of the most amazing productions of the poet's genius.

The one poem by Plácido which has been universally accepted by the critics as truly magnificent and worthy of the greatest masters of the Spanish language is the ballad *Jicotencal*. Not even Sanguily and Menéndez y Pelayo, the two most hostile critics of the poet, are lukewarm in their praise of *Jicotencal*. It is the most dynamic, most virile, most bravely heroic example of the poetry of Plácido. Here, long before the *americanismo* of Santos Chocano's modernist poetry is the example of a Cuban poet who had never been outside his native

island, yet feeling, as most Cubans do, a great sympathy for Mexico, an *americanismo,* or *continentalismo* and whose talent allowed him to transcribe such feelings in this *romance* in which the form and vocabulary are as classic as those of the *Góngora* of the period which preceded *culteranismo.*

In his laudatory verse in praise of the Spanish royal family Plácido did essentially the same thing as Avellaneda but with the important difference of *motive.* Plácido, never hoping such praise would benefit him directly, obviously hoped for reform for Cuba; Avellaneda, on the other hand, was much more interested in gaining for herself an appointment as *azafata* among the Queen's retainers and showed little concern for the fate of her native Cuba.

El Juramento, Al General La Flor and *¡Habaneros Libertad!* show Placido's hatred of tyranny; they are convincing proof of the poet's interest in any movement which might ameliorate the wretched conditions which then made all Cubans slaves but they give no hint of race-consciousness nor of any interest in a conspiracy of slaves against their masters in Cuba. The sonnets *La Muerte de Gesler, A Grecia* and *A Polonia* are indicative of Plácido's faith in eventual deliverance of Cuba from the Spanish yôke when considered in the light of the three more frankly revolutionary poems.

Among Plácido's poems of occasion are many which show much thought and deliberation on his part. From them one derives much biographical material otherwise unavailable. On more than one occasion Plácido showed his disgust with those who came to him with a few pieces of silver to pay for a sonnet. Much of his verse is full of references to poetic, mythological and Biblical characters. In this *genre* as in the others Plácido accepts the romantic theory of the poet as the elect of God who has a sacred mission among mere mortals, one of understanding and interpreting the Creator. In this verse we are impressed by Plácido's exceptional talent for description. His lines are not like those of Heredia, inspired by nature's turbulent moods or by her phenomena, but rather by her dulcet, quiet, almost pastoral mood.

The didactic poetry includes the poetry of philosophical or moral intent, the epigrammatic limericks and the fables. Here one is struck by inconsistencies and by the conscious attempt to strike a pose in keeping with the romantic *mal du siècle*. There is a dominant note of pessimism which grows deeper in the later poems of Plácido reflecting the disillusionment and fatalism so characteristic of the poet during the last years of his life. In his verse we find a truly romantic desire to shock the conventional bourgeoise, to deflate the ego of pompous fools and to exalt the aristocracy of the intellect. Plácido was an egotist in the romantic sense. As in his amatory verse, the didactic poems reflect the romantic *culte du moi*. There is no Vignyesque yearning for the ivory tower, but rather the superiority complex of a Victor Hugo which gloried in the deeds of Napoleonic supermen.

Plácido disliked the foppish aristocracy of decadent nineteenth century Spain as represented by the innumerable members of the Castilian nobility who swarmed in colonial Cuba, showed little sympathy for the colony and no kinship with the valor and *hidalguía* of the great Castilian tradition. The poet knew of the envy borne him by many of his contemporaries. He knew he was begrudged his freedom by slaves, his popularity, charm and talent by white rivals. Not one to take insult or injury without reprisal, Plácido retaliated in satiric verse much of it in the form of fables ridiculing the overly ambitious, the empty-headed snobs, the cowards, and the scornful hypocrites who looked down upon him because of the mere accident of birth.

The religious poetry of Plácido is indicative of a late trend in the poet's life towards a mysticism which is exemplified in the quartet of prison poems. In *Despedida a Mi Madre* the poet rises above the intrigue and chaos of this world and its sentiments; he seeks to comfort his anguished mother with the knowledge that he is resigned to his fate and has found peace at last in the hands of the Creator. The poem is simple, soft, delicate and almost childlike in its innocence. Although the

Plegaria a Dios is probably one of the most eloquent prayers in world literature, as poetry even it is not so perfect in form, so profound in feeling or so compelling in appeal as *Adiós a Mi Lira.* In it the poet has summarized not only his career but his philosophy, his mysticism and his martyrdom. In it he has not only poured his most intimate feelings but has done so in a way which makes the concluding couplet more convincing to those who are ready to admit that "man's inhumanity to man" was never more evident:

> Que entre Dios y la tumba no se miente.
> Adiós voy a morir . . . ¡Soy inocente!

In conclusion suffice it to state that it seems proper to assume that Plácido symbolized the struggle of *Cuba Libre* in the political sense and that in this respect he belongs to that group of Cuban martyrs which includes Heredia, Zenea, and Martí among the poets. We may feel also that Plácido's struggle is in many respects symbolic of that of all mixed bloods in America—Indian, Negro and Caucasian.

From the evidence presented in the biography of Plácido I conclude that there has been little exaggeration of Spanish misrule and tyranny in Cuba; that most accounts of the struggles of the Cuban people overlook the most long-suffering elements of the population. The Negroes and mulattoes had no spokesmen, no representatives. Greedy Spanish authorities misrepresented the hopes and ambitions of these colored *criollos* to their white countrymen. It was the age-old technique of *Divide et Impera,* which kept all Cubans enslaved. Of the few creole voices heard in Spain Plácido's was not only dangerous but mulatto. It was silenced.

It seems most improbable that the poet was guilty of a racial conspiracy although I do feel that he was cognizant of a growing revolutionary movement in Cuba and sympathized with it.

From his biography one does not gather that Plácido considered himself exceptional among the few Cubans of culture. He felt so thoroughly Cuban that he refused to join many

other patriots in exile. He was a genius with little background of education and travel. With benefit of study and residence in Spain, the products of his pen might have outshone those of the best of his contemporaries—Avelleneda, Zorrilla, Martínez de la Rosa and Espronceda. Conversely, it is precisely this Cubanism which makes him the first purely insular poet of Cuban literature. Only Milanés seems worthy of sharing with Plácido the honor of being the first in Cuba to write verses so *criollos* that they could have been written in no other part of the Spanish-speaking world.

In his folk-poetry—even though written in impecable Spanish interspersed with dashes of *criollismo,* in his simple, direct fables, in the lighter satiric poetry which flowed from his pen—we glimpse the opening wedge of a new movement in Cuban poetry, the realistic school of social-problem poetry and the folkloric Afro-Cuban verse which came into their own almost a century after the execution of Plácido. Today we look upon Plácido as but the herald of a parade of great mulatto Cubans whose contributions do not properly belong to the whites nor to the blacks but rather to the mulattoes. The famous quotation of Domingo Goicuría used on another occasion, is most *à propos* the position of Plácido in the vanguard:

"Hoy muere un hombre pero nace un pueblo."

VITA

Ben Frederic Carruthers was born September 14, 1911 in St. Louis, Missouri. The elder son of Benjamin Jackson Carruthers and Dollie Frances Archer Carruthers, he began his formal education in the Chicago public schools and was graduated from Hyde Park High School in 1928 and from Crane Junior College in 1930. He received the degree of Bachelor of Science in Education at the University of Wisconsin in 1932 and in 1933 was granted the degree of Master of Arts at the University of Illinois with major in French, minor in Spanish.

In September, 1933, he began his teaching career with the American Missionary Association at Tillotson College, Austin, Texas. There he held the rank of Associate Professor of French and Spanish until August, 1937, when he resigned to accept an appointment as Instructor in Romance Languages at Howard University, Washington, D. C.

He taught at Howard University until August, 1939, when he received a leave of absence later extended to two years to accept a General Education Board Fellowship to the Universities of Illinois and Havana. During these two years of study towards the doctorate, three semesters were spent in residence study at the University of Illinois and one semester and one summer session at the University of Havana.

Since 1938, the year of his first trip to Cuba, Mr. Carruthers has been intensely interested in Cuban literature and it is on this phase of Hispanic studies that he has concentrated his attention and research.

He is a member of Sigma Delta Pi (national Spanish honorary society), Pi Delta Phi (national French honorary society), of *Club Aténas* and of the *Sociedad de los Amigos de la Cultura Francesa,* the latter organizations of Havana, Cuba.